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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S HEADSCARF ISSUE OPENS ANOTHER POLITICAL RIFT

(U) Classified by Acting DCM Frank Ward. Reason: 1.5 (b,d).

[11](#). (C) Summary: The Islamist headscarf remains a threatening symbol for the Kemalist state. In inviting headscarved women to a reception in honor of the children's holiday, AK Party Speaker of Parliament Arinc has widened a rift between the GOT and the Turkish Establishment. End summary.

[12](#). (U) Parliament Speaker Bulent Arinc hosted an April 23 reception in honor of Turkey's national children's holiday. For the first time in 83 years, the President, TGS chief, opposition party members and other high-ranking bureaucrats all boycotted the event, ostensibly because Arinc's headscarved wife's name appeared on the original invitation as a co-host. Air Force commander Asparuk asked reporters rhetorically before the reception, "does this (the invitation) mean that we will have to bring our wives covered from head to toe? Of course I am not going."

[13](#). (U) In the event, Arinc's wife -- and most of the headscarved wives of senior AK officials including P.M. Erdogan -- did not attend (note: there were 5-10 headscarved wives in attendance. end note.). Pouring gas on the fire, however, Arinc and Erdogan took turns lambasting those who did not attend. Calling them "irresponsible," Arinc said that those "attempting to cast a shadow on the holiday have failed;" Erdogan went further, saying "our country will not forgive them."

Arinc, the Lightning Rod

[14](#). (C) Even as he touts his role as an above-the-fray figure, Arinc has repeatedly used his somewhat insulated position to appeal to the hearts and minds of AK grassroots and to challenge the status quo. Whether Arinc hopes to use the Speakership as a springboard to a higher office like P.M. or President remains an open question. In this case, although Arinc announced his wife would not attend the function, he did so mere hours before it began -- pointedly after it was clear that the generals and others were not going to attend. Moreover, in a speech at a symposium on constitutional law this week, Arinc suggested that "positive norms such as fairness are more important than constitutional law." Arinc's statement no doubt received kudos from AK supporters clamoring for fundamental changes to the constitution. At the same time, however, it was a clear challenge to the more Establishment-minded officials in attendance, who hold the document to be sacred.

Comment: Escalating tension

[15](#). (C) This most recent incident occurred against the backdrop of a series of GOT policies that have raised the hackles of a Turkish secular Establishment worried about the influence of "political Islam" in State organs. Press reports this week have focused on AK's efforts to place its supporters in the highest levels of the bureaucracy -- a traditional Turkish political practice. Media outlets have also highlighted a foreign ministry circular, which reportedly requires Turkish embassies abroad to reach out to the heretofore taboo Islamist foundation Milli Gorus (National View) and Fetullah Gulen's Nur movement. All eyes will now be on the April 30 NSC meeting, which will discuss according to the press, "government practices and appointments of new bureaucrats" -- but which could also be the first real showdown between the two camps since Erdogan became P.M.
PEARSON